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Introduction

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Introduction

Paule Lévy

1 Despite her relatively limited production, Grace Paley has left her imprint on the literature of her time and made a significant contribution to the art of short story writing in the last decades of the twentieth century. Throughout her life and literary career, Paley considered herself a story-listener as much as a story-teller, one attuned to the multiple voices and variegated tongues of the world she lived in and which she endeavored to reinvent—through her passionate commitment to the great political causes of her time[1] and through her life-long dedication to literature.

2 "Two ears, one for literature, one for home, are useful for writers," declares the author in the introduction to her *Collected Stories* (x), thus summing up the peculiarities of her writing, which is solidly grounded in the everyday life, language and politics of her time ("I write about the lives of women and men of our time" [Interview Hulley 24]), yet widely open to purely abstract speculation, be it of an ontological, moral or purely aesthetic nature. These "two ears" eventually converge in the discontinuous yet ongoing flow of voices, in the wide array of characters and discourses that build up her miniature, yet widely expanding fictional universe.

3 Her stories, most of which are delicately etched vignettes of family and urban life in the Bohemian New York of the nineteen sixties and seventies, appear as never-ending conversations between the various characters they feature, between narrator and reader, as well as between the world and words: "so that art and life cross imperceptibly into another in an erotic exchange and interchange" (Hulley 16). Highly unpredictable and provocative, the stories combine realism and metafiction, comedy and tragedy, optimism and a deep sense of anxiety and loss. Likewise, they alternate prolixity with an uncanny talent for leaving the essential unsaid, while ceaselessly exploring the troubled relation between self, language and the world.

4 Extraordinarily compressed and condensed, somewhat resistant to commentary in its remarkable fluidity and deceptive surface simplicity, Paley's work appears in fact as a remarkable blend of techniques borrowed from the oral tradition (in particular those inherited from her Jewish immigrant background) and the most daring avant-garde experiments. A minimalist rather than a realist in the conventional sense of the term,

the author views writing as exploration and experimentation first: "the possibility is that what we need right now is to imagine the real" (*Just as I Thought* 171). Though intent on rendering its texture, colors and rhythms, she defamiliarizes the familiar and allows all referential illusion to dissolve. Likewise, she shows little interest in characters and plot. She dismisses causality and determinism on both moral and aesthetic grounds: "Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented deserves the open destiny of life" ("A Conversation with my Father," *Collected Stories* 231). Mimetic on its own terms, her art strives to render the complexity, mutability and transience inherent to human existence and to celebrate its infinite possibilities. Paley deconstructs all social or cultural mythologies; she derides the illusions, platitudes and clichés on which ordinary people tend to build their lives. Yet she rehabilitates the dross and the mundane, suffusing them with unexpected poetry. Above all, she revels in the diversity, malleability and extraordinary plasticity of the English language ("you just throw the words all over the place and you have a whole new language almost" [Interview Batt and Rocard 128]), which she is able to perceive from the perspective of her plurilingual background.[2] This background also taught her that talk is vitality, life itself, and that it is the best antidote to solitude, disarray or existential anguish: "In the grave it will be quiet!", the narrator recalls in the story "The Loudest Voice" (*Collected Stories* 34).

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5 The present volume aims to explore the multiple facets of Grace Paley's short fiction with a special focus on her language and style as well as on the never-ceasing dialogue which the author maintained both with the authors of the past (at once revered and revoked in her best metafictional pieces) and with the most innovative voices of her own generation. This collection contains a wide array of scholarly contributions as well as two short pieces of a more personal nature.

6 The volume opens with a short biographical sketch in which Judith Arcana, Paley's literary biographer and friend, evokes Paley's fortitude and firmness of purpose as she took part in the major protest movements of her time. It is from this passion for social justice and freedom that the author drew most of her energy and artistic inspiration.

7 Victoria Aarons delineates the main characteristics of Paley's "characteristically post-war American-Jewish" urban voice: that of a diasporic people struggling to make sense of their lives mostly through the transmission of the stories that allow them to define themselves and their place in history. Language in Paley's stories is not only declarative. It is both "strategically preemptive and unexpectedly transformative."

8 In Paley's universe, still poised between the Old and the New World (at least in her early pieces), parents and children rarely speak the same language. The three articles that follow deal with Paley's bittersweet depiction of intergenerational relationships. Régine Camps-Robertson proposes "a dynamic interpretation of voice and generations" in "Goodbye and Good Luck," "The Immigrant Story" and "Dreamer in a Dead Language," three pieces in which she views the interplay of voice and age as a pretext for "measuring death against the individual's potential of renewal within the space of the short story." Clément Ulff analyses the dialectics of tradition and subversion, debt and emancipation, fiction and metafiction, ethics and aesthetics in Paley's famous "A Conversation with my Father." Laura Muresan dwells on a piece not included in the

Collected Stories, "My Father addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age," an ironic sequel to "A Conversation with my Father" with which it creates "an antiphonal effect," as it explores more encompassing issues, such as gender relationships and the burden of history.

9 "I don't understand how time passes," declares one of Paley's narrators ("Wants," *Collected Stories* 129). The two articles that follow address the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity as well as the relationship between time and language in Paley's short fiction. Tanguy Bérenger proposes a thematic and structural analysis of "Wants" and "Ruthy and Edie," which he perceives as reminiscent of philosopher Henry Bergson's conception of duration as a continuous flow in which past, present and future are interwoven. Anne-Laure Tissut, on the other hand, prefers to speak of "Paley's poetics of discontinuity," as she evokes the tensions between solitude and communication, hope and despair, life and death in Paley's stories, particularly in "Dreamer in a Dead language."

10 It is in the microcosm of Paley's half-real, half re-imagined urban neighborhoods that these fundamental tensions are played out. Nathalie Cochoy shows that Paley's "chorus of voices concur to delineate a new map" of New York, where the city landmarks tend to remain abstract while precedence is given to the life-sustaining and highly poeticized daily rituals of the community. While focusing on "Faith in a Tree," a story that takes place in Washington Square, Paule Lévy highlights Paley's constant shift from anecdote to history, from the local to the global, from the individual to the collective, from politics to aesthetics.

11 These shifts are ascribed to Paley's feminism and to her Jewish heritage in the short, meditative piece proposed in French by the writer Geneviève Brisac. Whatever the case may be, Paley's stories can be read "as a sort of encyclopedia of life turned into language," as Sylvie Bauer explains in an analytical panorama of Paley's stories. Bauer chooses to view Paley's stories mostly as linguistic experiments, concerned above all with the problematic relationship between life and art, between language and death.

12 The pieces that follow open onto links between Paley and some of her contemporaries. Paley is studied in relation to Philip Roth in Ada Savin's analysis of their respective stories, "The Loudest Voice," and "The Conversion of the Jews," which "treat religious matters on a playfully serious tone" and pave the way for the thematic and stylistic developments of the two authors' later fiction. Grace Paley's peculiar perception of city life is compared to Donald Barthelme's surreal collages in Claire Fabre-Clark's article. New York is a common ground for the two authors who, despite their fundamental differences, view text and town as "made of the same material." In the last article in this collection, a parallel is drawn between Grace Paley's very short piece "Mother" and Dawn Raffel's "Steam," two stories centered on absence and death, which Brigitte Félix reads in the light of Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* and *The Space of Literature*. Paley, unlike Dawn Raffel, positions herself "on the edge of disaster" only, since death, "that terrible limit against which we are spoken" (Blanchot), will be counteracted by talk.

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NOTES

1. Paley, for instance, actively campaigned against the Vietnam War and against the development of nuclear weapons. She was also an environmentalist and an ardent feminist.
2. "My childhood languages were English and Russian and Yiddish" (Interview Batt and Rocard 132).

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Paule Lévy is Professor of American literature at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin, France. Her research focuses on women's writing, ethnicity in literature and Jewish American literature, on which she has written extensively. Her recent publications include *American Pastoral: La Vie réinventée* (PUF, 2012), *American Pastoral: Lectures d'une oeuvre*, ed. (PU Rennes, 2011), *Autour de Saul Bellow*, ed. (PU Angers 2010) and *Mémoires d'Amériques,* co-ed. (Michel Houdiard, 2009).